December Wildlife: IVY

Ivy is so common that it's easily ignored, as it scrambles over walls and up trees. It's sometimes regarded a weed, even a parasite, and blamed with damaging walls and trees - probably because it's associated with ruins and decay. However, it has its own strong roots that supply all its nutrients from the soil, and uses walls and trees merely for support using specialised 'adventitious roots', which grow out of its branches and are covered with tiny hairs that cling into small, pre-existing crevices using a 'biopolymer' glue. These allow ivy to climb vertically up to 30m, although no higher than their support[1]. So while its weight can pull down branches and dead trees, and it is good at finding gaps in buildings through which to grow, it can also shelter and even hold up old buildings, and is therefore encouraged on some old buildings by English Heritage.

Its evergreen leaves come in two forms: juvenile three-lobed leaves and adult heart-shaped leaves. At this time of year, it may be still in flower, providing rare winter nectar for those bees, hoverflies, moths and other insects that venture out on warmer days and nights, stocking up for hibernation. As December continues, however, its fat-filled, black berries feed birds, especially thrushes, blackbirds and woodpigeons, as well as wood mice, who use ivy's cover to climb remarkably high up into trees.

All year round, it provides shelter for bats and birds. Its evergreen leaves make it ideal for Christmas wreaths on modern front doors, while the ancient Greeks and Romans wreathed their poets' heads with ivy, not laurel (despite which we have a poet laureate). In classical times, ivy wreaths were also worn by followers of

[1] René Descartes, in his Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison, *et chercher la vérité dans les sciences,* which contains the famous line '*je pense, donc je suis*', remarks that many followers of great thinkers *'.. sont comme le lierre, qui ne tend point à monter plus haut que les arbres qui le soutiennent'* – are like the ivy the that climbs no higher than its tree can support.

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Bacchus as they were believed to protect the wearer from inebriation however much they drank (this doesn't work – you just look both drunk and silly).

Ivy's clinging and its way of spreading across the ground and then up again, joining several trees together, have also made it a symbol of love and fidelity, and so sprigs are worn, or found in bouquets, at weddings, and it became a popular girl's name in the late 19th century (along with other floral names[2]. And trailing ivy is a common border in medieval manuscripts.

Of course you can always depend on Samuel Johnson for something clever yet ambiguous: 'A good wife is like the ivy which beautifies the building to which it clings, twining its tendrils more lovingly as time converts the ancient edifice into a ruin.'

John Clare, in his poem '*To the Ivy',* combines both the negative vibe:

Dark creeping Ivy, with thy berries brown,
That fondly twists' on ruins all thine own,
Old spire-points studding with a leafy crown
Which every minute threatens to dethrone;
With fearful eye I view thy height sublime,
And oft with quicker step retreat from thence
Where thou, in weak defiance, striv'st with Time,
And holdst his weapons in a dread suspense.

with the more positive:

But, bloom of ruins, thou art dear to me,
When, far from danger's way, thy gloomy pride
Wreathes picturesque around some ancient tree
That bows his branches by some fountain-side:
Then sweet it is from summer suns to be,
With thy green darkness overshadowing me.

'Picturesque' was THE trendy word of Clare's Romantic times, literally meaning worthy of a picture. I do wonder if he used it seriously here, though, or, given his usually realistic take on the darker nature of nature, he was mocking those readers who were swept away by the romance of the 'ideal' view. In a vogue that prefigured today's smart phones, the fashionable carried with them 'Claude glasses', small mirrors of tinted glass with which, their backs to the real view, they stumbled about trying to create the ideal reflected image of the scene behind them. The poet Thomas Gray (of Elegy in a Country Churchyard fame) had a nasty fall doing exactly this. It reminds me of my history teacher at school who (a

[2] Ivy is back in the charts again – it was the sixth most popular girl's name in England and Wales in 2020, although back down to number 25 (between Scarlett and Ella) in 2024. Other floral names in the top 50 include: Violet (16), Lily (18), Hazel (23) and Willow (27), with Iris just missing out at number 54.

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bit, but not totally, unfairly I think) told us to put away our cameras on a school trip, so as not to 'live for the future so that in the future you can live in the past.' Though thinking about it now, I do wonder if he didn't get that from someone else – I wish I had asked.

We have two native species of ivy in Great Britain. The common ivy *Hedera helix* (*hedera* is Latin for ivy, while the modern Elnglish word ivy comes from the Old English *ifig*), has three-lobed juvenile leaves and is found all over Europe, including in our churchyard. *Hedera hibernica*, the Atlantic ivy, is more common along the west coast and in Ireland, and has five- or even seven-lobed leaves. There are lots of other ivy species found around the world, some of which are grown in gardens as ornamental plants, as well as garden varieties of common ivy, with deeply cut or variegated leaves. Plus there are lots of unrelated plants whose habit or looks mean they have ivy in their names. Ground ivy, for example, also found in the churchyard, is a type of wild mint, that scrambles over the ground. Its Anglo-Saxon name was *hofe* which survives in its alternative name, alehoof, as it was used to clarify and flavour ale before hops started to be used in the sixteenth century.

Wild ivy leaves in the churchyard are an important spring and summer food for caterpillars of various butterflies and moths. Ivy leaves also appear in the medieval English phrase, found in Chaucer, 'go pipe [i.e. blow] into an ivy leaf', which means something like 'go whistle in the wind'.

But let's give the final words to Vincent van Gogh, who had an eye for natural beauty. Writing home in 1877 he said, 'How right it is to love flowers and the greenery of pines and ivy and hawthorn hedges…'